



# CRIMPVILLE COMMENTS

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Town Meeting Day in Bellingham was the first holiday of the year for the male population, occurring on the first Tuesday in March. It was a day when the solid men of the town came to the front and sat in high seats, dignified and important; when the less solid got drunk, and the boys played games about the town-house, and ate as many buns as they had cents to buy."

## TOWN

**MEETING** The above was how John Albee described the town-meetings of Bellingham in the 1800's, and what follows is more of his impressions.

## TIME

The town-house of Bellingham was an old Universalist Church whose society had been uprooted and driven away by the sermons, prayers and persecutions of the Baptist brethren and sisters. It must have been an ancient building as it had a high pulpit, a sounding board still higher and square pews. I used to go in hungry to buy the buns, which were on sale

in one of these square pews, fitted up as a small shop, boards being laid on the top rail, and the high seats forming shelves for the display of eatables. I recall only the buns with distinctness, buns with three large plums sticking out of their shiny red tops, which afforded the greatest return to a hungry boy for the trifling sum he had to expend. These plums deceived me into the belief that there were more inside and sometimes I did find one lost



Center Library in the Center School before the present Library was built. Note the furnishings which would be worth considerable today.

in the air holes of the sponge-like cake. But the bun was sweet and that was enough, sweetened with white sugar too, a rare flavor in those days. I write white sugar but its current name was loaf sugar. It came in cone-shaped packages wrapped in heavy chocolate colored paper, and this paper was used by women for dyeing. These packages were hung up over the counters of all country stores. The sale was small as it was expensive and limited in use, chiefly to the sick room, wedding and funeral feasts. A trader would buy enough to last him for a long time; consequently the packages hung in their places year after year, becoming dirty and fly specked. But the inside was well protected with soft, white paper and, when opened, revealed its dazzling crystals. I liked it almost as much as candy and I rarely had a bit of the precious article. Brown sugar and molasses were the common household sweet; bread and molasses an excellent lunch for hungry boys always crying for something to eat and never filled.

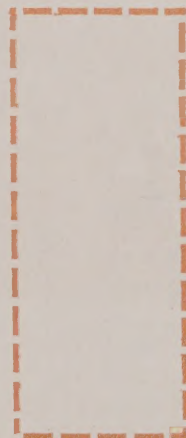
The town meeting bun is a thing of the past. When I ventured into the town-house I stepped very softly and felt an exceeding awe. It was a strange sensation to be moving about among men whose legs were as long as I was tall and generally, as unnoticed as if I did not exist. Sometimes a kindly old man would look down, put his hand on my head and say: "You'll be a man before you know it." I have, since those days, known town meetings from the standpoint of a man and voter and have even taken part in their counsels; yet I have had always more interest in them as an observer than as an active participant. Perhaps this was because I was not an office seeker. I have revolved schemes for town improvements a whole year and taken them into the March meeting only to have them smashed in a moment. In general, at the meetings in rural districts, where there is little business to transact and the day is before them, the citizens like to hear discussion, especially if the disputants get into a passion or interject a little fun. Then everybody takes a hand and the main question is so confused and lost that even the moderator cannot restate it. Party spirit rages, old feuds come to life and men remember all the ugly doings and sayings of their neighbors and are hot to pay off old scores and get even, as they say. Suddenly, at the height of the wrangle, the whole matter is dropped, peace reigns and the regular business is resumed as if nothing had happened. These tempests clear the air for a year and everybody is in better humor having discharged his accumulation of grudges and animosities. I have heard closer speech, more sententious, more convincing and



Anthony Fiori. His story appeared in an earlier issue entitled "Cows Go Home."

## PLEASE NOTE

This newspaper is printed on a special stock. Blow your breath on space at the right ... If the paper turns red, see your doctor immediately. If it it turns blue, contact your lawyer. If it turns black, waste no time in making your funeral arrangements. If it does not turn any color, you are perfectly well, and there is no reason why you should not vote .



and in more direct and forcible language in town meeting than from any other forum. Men are not so ambitious of eloquence as they are to carry their point. There is often more fun, wit and sarcasm as well as logic than goes with more pretentious and popular rostrums. When the town-meeting is abolished freedom will have lost her humble but most powerful ally. When the town grows to a city all is lost; for our freedom and individual rights depend on direct and individual participation in public affairs. Otherwise, all is compromise, averages, irresponsibility and mere chance how affairs turn out. The larger the city, the easier it is for rascals to rule."

The town-house to which Albee refers to is of course our present Town Hall. It was always used for town meetings until late years, for as the town grew, town meetings were held in the Keough School, and now in the High School. So it is that New England Communities are in the convulsions of their annual town meetings. It is a time when you listen to your neighbor's arguments and stand up to be counted in his presence, either for or against. It does not matter whether the question is for a new chain saw for the tree warden

or a multi-million dollar school budget. Sadly, more vocalizing is now done outside the town meeting than at the town meeting. The plain talk of old is vanishing.

In the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Omaha, is a yellowed photo of a sign along the railroad right-of-way put up 100 years ago.



The oldest mill still standing in Bellingham. Was known as the Bellingham Woolen Company. Located on Maple Street in North Bellingham.

#### NOTIS

Tresspassers will be persecuted to the full extent of 2 mungrel dogs which never was over sochible to strangers and 1 dubble brl shot gun which aint loaded with sofa pillers. Dam if I aint gotten tired of this hell raisin on my place.

B. Griscom.

B. Griscom no doubt has long since gone to paradise, but he left a message much needed today. He stated his position, made it plain and he was not elegant about it. He didn't have to be. He meant what he said.

The inelegant old Statesman of the 19th Century, Senator Beveridge, when told that a certain corrupt politician should be given credit for good manners and a brilliant mind, roared, "Yes, and like a dead mackerel in the moonlight, he shines and stinks and stinks and shines."

All kinds of fancy words are used now in place of plain talk, both in and out of town meetings. In the old days, the kid who hung around with a tough gang and got into trouble expected punishment. Now he is suffering from an identity crisis. This will get him past looted coin boxes and

even murder. Bums are people suffering from motivational deficiency due to deprivation. A fire-bug is simply alienated and doing his own thing.

Study Committees are needed today for everything from laying a pipe to the patching of a hole. Not so in the old days. The old folks settled everything at the town meeting. They never thought of meetings behind closed doors, or suppressing of news. They never heard of matching funds, cherry sheets, orientation meetings and motivation meetings. They did know that they had no control over death but did have control over taxes and made their feelings known in very plain talk.

It's too bad that B. Griscom is dead or he might have become President.

"Dam if some of us aint gotten tired of this hell raisin."

At right, Red Mill after it burned down. Caswell House on High Street can be seen by following path. Note outdoor toilet near house.



At left, school bus of yesteryear. Then horse-drawn, it was known as a school Barge. Gentleman with cap is Francis Thayer. Other man is not known.

# And Now You See It —

Previous issues of Crimpville Comments featured a history of railroads all leading to the railroads of Bellingham. In

this issue, we are featuring one of the most interesting stories of railroads in Bellingham---the Ghost Train. This train, running from New Haven to Boston and officially known as the New England Limited, soon was nicknamed the Ghost Train. The reason for this was that it was an all white train except the locomotive with gilt lettering on the cars. It certainly looked ghostly as its pale, sinuous length streaked across the country side just as it was getting dark. It was an elegant train. A newspaper story of it described this beautiful train as follows: "The parlor cars are furnished with velvet carpets, silk draperies and white silk curtains; the chairs are upholstered in old gold plush, and large glass mirrors set off the car handsomely. Three of them have a state room and 26 seats in the main saloon, and the other four have 30 seats each. The royal buffet smoking cars which will be run in addition to the ordinary smoking cars are decorated in the same manner as the parlor cars....The Pullman Palace Car Company has designed a special dining car for this train."

An unusual feature of the dining car was that all-white waiters were used and all-white porters took care of the pullman accommodations. A man by the name of Clark was the president of the railroad and he liked to travel on the Ghost Train. His favorite engineer was Gene Potter, a daring and at the same time, a skillful engineer who ran this popular train. One night, when Clark was in the parlor car of the train near Willimantic, Conn., the train was a half hour behind time, and he heard two passengers grumbling about it. One of them said that he needed to catch a train for Maine at Boston but could never make it now.

A little later Clark, who was not known to the passengers, beckoned to the brakeman coming through the car and whispered in his ear, "Tell Potter to



The Ghost Train in Boston.

get us into Boston on time." When Potter got the message, he stared and swore, but he was not one who said that it couldn't be done. He opened the throttle and away they went through the night for a memorable run; swaying through the hills of Connecticut and taking the curves so skillfully that the passengers did not know how fast they were moving. They thundered over switches and crossings through Putnum, Blackstone, Bellingham and Franklin, arriving at Boston at nine o'clock, exactly on time.

The Ghost Train ran on the line that was recently torn up through South Bellingham and the Bellingham Historical Commission has carefully preserved a section of track over which the Ghost Train ran.

Another story of Gene Potter and the Ghost Train occurred just past the Center Street Crossing. As the train was speeding along the right-of-way, Potter saw a woman in the middle of the tracks picking up coal. He blew the whistle to no avail and was forced to stop the train. He went up to her and asked if she did not hear the whistle, to which she replied, "Yes, but I'm getting sick and tired of being interrupted by every train passing by here and I don't intend to move off the tracks any more. Potter gently took her by the arm and got the woman and her bucket of coal off the track so that the Ghost Train could continue on its way.

The Ghost Train was short-lived, for on October 20,



EUGENE E. POTTER.



Parlor car of the Ghost Train.

1895, the Ghost Train disappeared forever as it was too hard to hard to keep clean. It was replaced by a still faster train, the "Air Line Limited" running at the same time of day and making only one stop--at Middletown to change engines. It was the only train that ever ran through New Haven without stopping. Neither the Ghost Train or the Air Line Limited ever stopped in Bellingham except on the occasion of the old woman gathering coal for her stove.

Trains are heard no more in South Bellingham. The old roadbed over which the Ghost Train ran is now used by snowmobiles and minibikes--but there was a day when many fast trains speeded through the countryside of Bellingham bringing their passengers to their destination.

Only one track now remains in Bellingham and that now only carries freight between Boston and Milford. But, perhaps times are changing and we may again see passenger trains in Bellingham, but that is only a dim hope.

The Bellingham Historical Commission is greatly indebted to Medway Historian Francis Donovan who supplied us with the pictures of the Ghost Train and for the picture of its famed engineer, Gene Potter. Mr. Donovan's father knew Potter very well and many stories about this man. Mr. Donovan has a beautiful story with pictures published by Yankee Magazine in a hard-cover book and another story by Mr. Donovan is now being published by another publisher. Bellingham should be proud that she has a part in the very famous history of the Ghost Train.

Our next issue will contain more about railroads in Bellingham including several crossing accidents, some of them fatal, and one of them humorous about Bellingham's most famed town moderator.



Another view of the Ghost Train with its crew standing alongside.

Pictured at right is another of Bellingham's oldest and well preserved homes now owned by Russel and Mary Nelson.

The exact age of the house is not known but there is a brick in the dutch oven in the basement portion which bears the date, 1706.

Located on North Main Street, it was, at one time an inn for travellers on the stage coach between Taunton and Worcester. Another interesting feature of this house is a tunnel under the fireplace and dutch oven which would heat the basement floor. As



shown in the picture, there once was a front door which is no longer there. It is believed that this door led to a tap room, also part of the basement.

### THE GUMPS —



The house stands now on a knoll but there was a more gradual climb when it was used as an inn. Fill for the overpass for the railroad on North Main Street was taken from this area, thus creating the level section from the house to the Charles River.

Also shown on this page is an old cartoon now long gone. It appeared in many newspapers. Date on this one is Dec. 6, 1941.

### STRANGE HOUSE GUEST

